

MEETING SUMMARY
SAN JUAN ISLANDS VRS COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP MEETING
SAN JUAN ISLAND YACHT CLUB, FRIDAY HARBOR, WA
Wednesday, September 11, 2013 11:30 a.m. – 2:05 p.m.

Note: This meeting summary represents notes from the Washington State Department of Transportation Ferries Division (WSF) Partnership Group Meeting, and is not a formal transcript or minutes. It is provided as a record for the staff, group members and public in attendance, and other interested parties.

Welcome

David Moseley, WSDOT Assistant Secretary

David welcomed the group and made some opening remarks regarding the new concept for reservations in the San Juan Islands that has been presented to WSF.

Meeting Overview

Michael Hodgins, BERK & Associates

Michael went over the agenda and the meeting objectives.

Questions & Comments

1. (Jim Corenman) You're trying to build a meeting structure that forces things into boxes; we don't know where it goes. It's too abstract.
We are not trying to shut down the dialogue, but some of this process builds on decisions that need to be made; we want to focus on how to make the concept work.
Some concepts don't work when you get down to details, like the Premier Program here in the islands.
That's a great example; today we are presenting a different concept. If you like the idea of time release rather than priority access then we can take your feedback and start working on the details.
2. (John Whetten) You were insisting that we focus on side issues like software a couple of meetings ago; I like this approach better.
The concept is important; before we were talking about how operations at Anacortes would work based on the other concept. Now that the time release approach is on the table those operations would be different. We want to settle on the bigger ideas, then go back and refine them.
3. (Susan Young) I'd like to voice support of Jim and John. I'm familiar with this new concept, and support it a great deal. However, my concern is the way you decide to operationalize this could make it or break it. It could be effective but if it's not done properly then it will be worse than having nothing at all.
That is correct; the concept has to be workable operationally. We are more or less on the same page. When we rolled reservations out at Port Townsend we worked with the community, then took the lessons we learned and made tweaks as we went along. We will do the same here, and modify the system if things are not working. We will continue to get your feedback as the system is in place; it will be an ongoing process.

New Go-Live Date: December 28, 2014

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian discussed moving the go-live date from fall to winter, 2014.

Questions & Comments

1. (Beverly Zapalac) Every time I go to the terminals your people are very busy. How will you find the time to train them during implementation unless you take away some of what they have to do?
When we implemented at Port Townsend we brought staff in outside of their normal shifts for training. That is something we will build into the budget so that we can provide hands-on training before the rollout. They would not be able to train during their normal shifts. An advantage of rolling out in winter is that is the least busy time and it will give us an opportunity to see how everything works before the crowds come.
2. (John MacLeod) I have a different opinion. There is a lot of interest in reservations here because the current system is so broken. Why does it have to be so far off? And now you're delaying it again; it should be put in effect as soon as possible. Having it go operational at a time when it's really not needed—how much will you really learn from that? I would like to see a sooner date.
3. (Jamie Stephens) If you put it in effect in winter, then people could start making reservations for the spring schedule shortly after that. I would suggest focusing on westbound first, then phasing in eastbound as the capital improvements are made.
We will be discussing that.
4. (Bill Pike) You will be rolling out right before the holidays—perhaps you should wait until past the first of the year rather than doing it with the schedule change?
We have asked the terminal staff that question and they don't seem to feel any concern about rolling out before the holidays. We will continue to monitor that; the option is there.
5. (Larry Vandermay) I disagree with Jamie; I think eastbound is as important as westbound on Orcas. Phasing it in later doesn't make any sense to me.
6. (Jim Corenman) One thing we talked about at Friday Harbor and Orcas is the Sunday afternoon issue. If you want to just dip your toe in you could just do eastbound on Sundays to start with in December.
7. (Howie Rosenfeld) I second what Jim said. This discussion is reminiscent of earlier discussions where we don't know what it is yet and how burdensome it will be. So can we find out what it is and then decide about rollout?
Let's move on to the next agenda item.

Release of Reservation Space

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian discussed the concerns the group had about the Premier Program proposal, and then presented a revised two-phase space release concept (see Release of Reservation Space handout).

Questions & Comments

1. (John Whetten) Does that 50% include commercial users?
Yes. About 60% of the commercial customers in the San Juan Islands book their travel more than 30 days in advance. As soon as we open a season they book the entire season; they plan ahead, similar to tourists.
2. (Bill Pike) Is it reasonable to assume that the percentage could be adjusted based on the departure terminal? You are still not going to have eastbound reservations from Lopez and Shaw, correct?
Yes.
It makes more sense to do a 60/35 release for traffic leaving Friday Harbor versus traffic coming to Friday Harbor.
That's definitely an option. A lesson we learned from Port Townsend was that when we modified our percentages based on the likelihood of overloads on certain sailings, we confused people. We learned that we needed a more consistent system.
The downside to this is that if you open 50% six months ahead and that starts in January, then in March people will start planning a trip to Friday Harbor for June and they will make all of their other reservations: hotel, campsite, etc. and then they won't be able to reserve a ferry. It's a disincentive for coming to the islands.
The likelihood that all the boats would be full is unlikely. They would be able to see which sailings are open and guarantee themselves a spot.
Being able to call someone on the phone would be nice; if it's all done online no one is there to explain that more space will open up. We want to avoid a situation where all boats show as sold out; communication is key with out-of-towners.
We will focus on communications; we understand how important that is for this to work.
3. (Susan Young) How much of that 50% is commercial?
We don't know if we will set aside space solely for commercial users. They end up being the first to make reservations just because of the nature of their businesses. We will monitor that to make sure the system is meeting everyone's needs. We have a good relationship with our commercial customers, and we could end up with some kind of hybrid system where they get priority access. The idea is to make reservations available to customers at the time that they are making travel decisions; the exact details still need to be worked through. We don't want you to fear that if we give commercial users first access that people will abuse that angle; the process for becoming a commercial account holder includes providing your business license, credit and background checks, providing three companies that you do business with, etc. We have not seen any abuse at Port Townsend.
4. (Carol Anderson) If a visitor books a sailing they don't prefer because all the others showed as full, when you release more space a week prior would they be able to shift to a sailing that they prefer?
Yes, up until 5:00 p.m. the day prior to your sailing you can cancel, and up to two hours prior to your sailing you can change it to another available sailing. It will be flexible; we understand travel uncertainty.
5. (Howie Rosenfeld) As we go forward with the concept, I want to warn you of the PR issue in the islands. People wanting to get off-island the same day will be scared by the 5% number; it isn't going to sound like enough.
We understand; we are just throwing out numbers right now. We need to talk about what exactly will work for everyone the best. We will more than likely start with less than 95% reservations and then grow from there.

6. (Bill Pike) I don't know if this is possible, but in the airline industry they have a waitlist for full flights. Can we have something similar, and how would that work operationally? *The "virtual queue" idea has been floated before; part of our challenge is that we are trying to address different customer needs: those who can plan ahead versus those who need to be able to travel spontaneously. We don't want to set up a system where longer term planners get on a wait list, creating a disadvantage for those with last minute travel plans.*
7. (Jamie Stephens) I agree with Howie; the 5% scared me too. Also, it's a tiny detail but long term is a reservation and short term is confirmed space. I think you should shorten that second phased release to 24 hours instead of a week.
The concern there is that the boat may not fill up. During peak times you may not have enough people that are willing to wait that long. The shorter that period is prior to departure, the fewer customers you can serve. We don't have a solution yet but that is our concern.
If service was disrupted you would have a week's worth of reservations to fix rather than a day's.
We can't have boats not leaving full if there is a demand for sailings. We need to find the balance and provide equal access, without discouraging people from riding.
8. (John MacLeod) I like this new concept overall, but there is one thing I don't like. I understand what you are trying to do with the week, but the pendulum has swung too far. With the Premier Program there was a lot of effort to address the needs of islanders; this program doesn't have anything for the ongoing users. People will know when that space opens up and they will jump on it. Having the same approach but also having some percentage set aside for islanders would work better. You're throwing the baby out with the bathwater.
9. (John Whetten) The system I envision from reading your material would be that westbound from Anacortes, you wouldn't get through the tollbooth unless you have a reservation or confirmed space, from the telephone, or the web, or a kiosk, or the tollbooth. If there is a vacancy on the boat when you get to the booth you would be given confirmed space and allowed through. The beauty is that the infrastructure does not have to change at Anacortes, and the system is still first-come, first-served, it just is moved from the parking lot to our devices or a kiosk—like the one we would like to see in the Costco lot in Burlington. Rather than waiting in a line for five hours, we can go elsewhere. It's a huge advantage for everyone.
That's a great summary of the concept.
10. (Margot Shaw) To clarify, would the Anacortes boats have different capacities?
Yes, mostly they will be in the 144 car range, but not all.
These percentages won't mean as much to people as the quotas; the buyer will not understand what a percentage represents unless you put that out there. It's different than Port Townsend where they always have the same amount of space.
The advantage is that if we have to downsize a vessel for some reason, when we open up that second space there will be less risk of overbooking.
Most people don't know what that percentage means; they need to see the number.
11. (Jim Corenman) You said you want all sailings released at six months to keep it simple?
Yes.
I think you should be flexible; there is a good argument that certain sailings should be less to encourage off-peak sailings.

12. (John Brantigan) I think it's a mistake to open things up like that. Weekenders will reserve every Friday and Sunday all summer long. Locals need to be able to make appointments and know that we can make them.
When we first rolled out at Port Townsend, we thought about making all the off-peak sailings available earlier, but we learned that it was very confusing for our customers. We got flooded with calls to customer service. When we opened up the entire season at one time it was successful at Port Townsend; that is not necessarily true here. Do you prefer longer than seven days for the second phase?
Yes, and I think you're rejecting the Premier idea too quickly. Make everyone sign up for it and just require one travel per month to qualify. Give the islanders some degree of priority.
The Priority Program has merit, and we are not saying that idea is dead. We are working through the options.
13. (Sally Thomsen) I disagree. When I saw this packet I was pleasantly surprised; I think it reflects what the islanders want. I agree with Howie that the drive-up percentage should be higher than 5%. I get people to register for programs for a living, and a lot of people in the islands won't commit to anything until after the deadline. I don't understand the six months out thing, there is no schedule out; it should come out in line with the schedule.
It will come out with the schedule; we are trying to get the schedule out six months in advance.
14. (Ken Burtness) The test page of real-time data is great; I love it. I want to elaborate on what John said. Right now the system is to wait in line, sometimes for a long time. This idea of same day reservations means we have a chance to change the system so that we don't have to wait in line. When people realize that they will like the idea of a reservations system. The idea that you would get to the booth at noon and they would send you away with a confirmed spot on the 5:00 p.m. boat, rather than just having to sit in the parking lot is great. I love that idea.
Also, with the VMS signs on the highway warning you of overloads, you would be able to go to a kiosk in Anacortes rather than even sitting through the line at the booth.
15. (Susan Young) I love the fact that this deals with the problems we had with the Premier Program; the issue was that we couldn't base it on residency, so the people who live on the island but don't travel frequently would be at a disadvantage. Also, when people get online to see how much space is left, all they need to know is whether they can get on or not. I don't think you have to give them too much information; just say the space is there or it's not.
16. (John Whetten) My response to those that say 95% is too high is that the whole idea is still first come, first served. It's just not happening in the parking lot. If you have a significant amount of space that is not reservable then there is an incentive to drive up and you end up cluttering up the lot with people who shouldn't be there.
17. (Teresa Sundstrom) I would like to see that seven days shortened because of the school system. For example, a springtime baseball game on a Tuesday gets rained out; now what? I have to reschedule in a period shorter than a week; we're talking 24 hours.
18. (Howie Rosenfeld) To clarify my PR comment from earlier about 5% being scary, I was suggesting a higher drive-up amount just for the rollout, not long term.
19. (Clark Johnson) One piece that goes under the radar sometimes is that we're always thinking about the high demand sailings. On some days even in the summer there are

some boats that are not in high demand. The scariness will only be until the system gets going; any concern will diminish through experience.

Michael asked the group to around the room and give their thoughts on the new phased release concept versus the Premier Program; which they like more and why.

20. (Howie Rosenfeld) I think the simplicity of the timed release idea has advantages, but we need to figure out how the system can be gamed, figure out the glitches, and then make sure we deal with the demand for same-day travel. I think there is flexibility that can be put in.
21. (John MacLeod) I like the new idea, but it doesn't really address the needs of islanders. I think starting with this as a base, then having a hybrid approach of bringing in some percentage of Premier users could work.
22. (Deborah Hopkins) I like the new concept. I like the idea of making sure islanders have first priority even though I represent visitors. I also want to mention the idea of having a kiosk in Burlington rather than only in Anacortes; that would be really good for us.
23. (Clark Johnson) I hope it will come as no surprise that I favor the two-tiered approach, but I have a real concern that the devil is in the details. A great concept could be executed in an unworkable way. I subscribe to the concept but I presented a holistic concept and I reserve the right to aggressively say if some decisions are not working.
24. (Susan Young) It will come as no surprise that I cannot support the original concept, and I do support this new idea. I agree with Clark that a wonderful idea can be messed up if not implemented properly.
25. (Bill Pike) I'm a huge fan of keeping it simple and this does that. I think this is the way to go, but the devil is in the details and it's going to take constant monitoring and adjusting, particularly in the first year until the clientele become educated and you are comfortable administering the system. Don't wait until 24 hours prior to release space or the boats won't fill up.
26. (Ken Burtness) I started these meetings totally opposed to reservations, then I became resigned to the idea, then I read this and suddenly realized it can be implemented in a way that's great. This addresses a lot of the problems with the previous concept, and I think you can simply adjust it to make it fair for everybody. We can get away from waiting in long lines with a reservation system; when that sinks in for people they will love it.
27. (Carol Anderson) I've always been an advocate of knowing if I can make a ferry when I'm in Burlington. If there is a kiosk there then I can use it before I ever go to Anacortes. I thought the other system would disenfranchise people who don't travel enough, and it was overly complex. I'm excited about the new concept; I think it's a good answer.
28. (Sally Thomsen) Ditto that, this is why I joined this committee. I felt defeated before, now I'm excited. We have discussed making better use of off-peak sailings; I would like to see this system push people toward those boats.
29. (Terresa Sundstrom) I like that idea, it was on my list as well. I was thinking you should make the redeye out of Friday Harbor a non-reserved sailing. I know I can catch that one because it's never full. The concept of pushing people onto off-peak sailings would be beneficial.
30. (Jamie Stephens) I like the current proposal. I would like to point out that in our school system 40% of the students are on free lunch. These people can't afford much and need

to be able to travel when they want to. With all due respect to Orcas, who does need a better schedule, a shorter term on the second release would be better. And though it will not solve the Orcas problem, I still think you should rollout westbound first and then eastbound.

31. (Gordon Jonasson) I support this concept. One thing is that it levels the playing field between customers. It addresses the problems I had with the Premier Program. I'm not clear on the boarding pass answer; I agree that the devil is in the details. I would propose a kiosk in Anacortes and one in Burlington. And in the proposal I read that you will still allow drive-ups without a reservation to sit in the lot; that will defeat the traffic management idea. Don't let them past the booth without confirmed space.
32. (John Whetten) I like this; I'm very enthused. It's much closer to the devil we know than the devil we don't know. It maintains the first come, first served, it just puts it somewhere else so we can do something other than sit in line with our time. I think the emphasis should be on westbound from Anacortes implementation first while you plan eastbound. I think westbound is more simple and less infrastructure improvements are required.
33. (John Brantigan) However you do it, first solve the problem with the bottleneck at the tollbooths in Anacortes. You need a second lane. The reason I liked the Premier Program was that you had a credit card on file to simplify the system. If the kiosk could know that and just print it out so you don't have people paying at the booth that would help.
34. (Larry Vandermay) I saw Clark's presentation, and the things I like about it are that it's simple, it's easy to adjust, and I like the idea that no terminal improvements are required. With the seven day release I think when a boat goes down you have a week of reservations to move rather than a few days' worth. Good job Clark.
35. (Jim Corenman) I echo that. I don't think the Premier Program is a good fit for the islands. I do like the new concept but I think we need to look at the numbers. The devil's in the details. I think two or three days rather than seven would be better.
36. (Margot Shaw) I'm in favor of the new concept. How will you handle people who do not have a credit card?
That is an ongoing challenge.
When we know the specifics of the concept, would it be good for us to go out and survey our fellow islanders and get ideas and feedback?
That's a good idea; we will keep that in mind.
37. (Beverly Zapalac) That is one thing that I already question; some people don't have credit cards or computers. I find this new concept very interesting and I'm in favor as long as we work out the operations so that it does work.
38. (Bill Pike) It just occurred to me about the kiosks—it's obvious that there is a need for one in Anacortes, and it would be convenient in Burlington as well, but for people coming either direction on I-5 maybe you could use the weigh stations? I assume they are DOT facilities, they're right off the interstate, and would be convenient places to put kiosks. You want to catch those people who don't have reservations before they get to Anacortes.
That is a good conversation for our next meeting. We want to be cautious about spending money on kiosks; we're working on that topic currently.
39. (John MacLeod) Won't most people use their smartphones?

40. (Susan Young) Going back to Margot's suggestion, we could survey who has smart phones and credit cards.
That would be great.

ITS & Communications

Leonard Smith, WSF Operations Manager

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Leonard discussed the revised plan for ITS elements (see the Phase II Capital for Anacortes and San Juan Islands handout). Brian discussed the updates and feedback on the Current Conditions website.

Questions & Comments

1. (Margot Shaw) Where is the Orcas booth to be built?
That will be prior to the access road up the hill. It will help us a lot because it's a control point.
2. (Jim Corenman) Will the automated measuring system be associated with EFS?
No, it will be standalone.
3. (Ken Burtness) With the real-time data on what space is available, cameras may not be pertinent.
We can discuss that.
4. (Clark Johnson) Are the cameras expensive?
Cameras are cheap; it's really running the conduit that costs money. With Anacortes we are looking at using existing light standards. We are looking at the least expensive way to accomplish what we need using the existing infrastructure.
Tools that used to be relevant become less so with newer technologies coming along. True, a graphic online showing the lanes filling up may be more useful than cameras.
5. (Beverly Zapalac) How many lanes will you renumber?
There are a total of 16 lanes, with three in customs.
So you are not adding lanes by making the existing lanes narrower?
No; we thought about that but decided against it.
6. (Carol Anderson) I find the web cameras useful and I use them all the time, but I'm never quite sure which lanes they are using to stage for Friday Harbor.
We will be changing operations so that certain lanes will always be used for a particular destination. You're correct; the way they stage now is confusing and it's hard to know what's happening.
7. (Margot Shaw) Can the VMS signs identify how many spaces are left?
We have looked at that, but we are limited by the size of the signs.
8. (Jim Corenman) Can we distribute the Current Conditions link more widely?
Friends and family are fine, but please do not post it publicly.

Public Comment

1. Thank you for volunteering your time for this. I live in Lynnwood and I am a transportation aficionado of sorts. My sister lives on San Juan Island and I don't get to see her enough. I am pleased with this plan, and more pleased to hear some of you recognize that this doesn't solve all the problems. I find it offensive

to see words like “priority” or “executive;” these have no place in the State of Washington. I hope we can get away from differentiating people; we are all the same. Also, I would pay if I knew I didn’t have to sit in line. I asked my sister what she does when all the tourists are lined up to go home, and she said she just waits. Whenever you release this, I would hope you don’t spend too much time sitting here trying to figure out percentages. Ready, fire, aim, aim. I don’t have much interest in when it rolls out, it’s most important to develop what works. Give it to the staff at WSF and let them work out the fine details. It will be good for all of us customers who would like some certainty. The framework seems excellent. Recognize that tweaks will happen after rollout; avoid analysis paralysis. Please continue to use the reservation software you are already using; it works. As for the 30 days of credit for commercial vehicles, the last time I checked the State constitution says you can’t extend credit. It should be a preloaded account. Your work is solving half the problem; the other half would be solved by using some sort of variable pricing based on demand. WSF can make a recommendation to the Transportation Commission that makes the final call on fares. There is no tolling consistency. It would make more sailings free for you, it would generate more income for WSF; variable pricing based on demand would work to your advantage. I would hope the last line of your report would include in bold print that a serious look at variable tolling would help solve your problems.

Conclusion

The next suggested meeting date is November 13, 2013. David thanked the group for their ongoing participation. Meeting was adjourned.

Group Members

Present	Name of Group Member	Representing
	Adrienne Adams	Lopez Island
	Mike Aley	Orcas Island
X	Carol Anderson	San Juan Island
	Kathy Booth	Lopez Island
X	John Brantigan	Shaw Island
X	Ken Burtness	Lopez Island
	Cass Clark	Lopez Island
X	Jim Corenman	San Juan Island
	David Dubbell	San Juan Island
	Lance Evans	Orcas Island
	Tony Ghazel	Orcas Island
	Wally Gudgell	Orcas Island
	John Hess	San Juan Island

X	Deborah Hopkins	San Juan Island
X	Clark Johnson	Lopez Island
X	Gordon Jonasson	Lopez Island
	Mark Lione	Anacortes
X	John MacLeod	Orcas Island
	Pat McKay	San Juan Island
X	Bill Pike	Mount Vernon
	John Poletti	Orcas Island
X	Howie Rosenfeld	San Juan Island
X	Margot Shaw	Orcas Island
X	Jamie Stephens	Lopez Island
	Mike Stolmeier	Orcas Island
X	Terresa Sundstrom	San Juan Island
X	Sally Thomsen	San Juan Island
X	Larry Vandermay	Orcas Island
X	John Whetten	Lopez Island
X	Susan Young	Lopez Island
X	Beverly Zapalac	Lopez Island

Project Team

- David Moseley, WSDOT Assistant Secretary
- George Capacci, WSF Deputy Chief of Operations
- Marta Coursey, WSF Director of Communications
- Doug Schlieff, WSF Senior Shoreside Manager
- Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations
- Dwight Hutchinson, WSF VRS Manager
- Michael Hodgins, BERK & Associates
- Leonard Smith, WSF Operations Manager
- Rachel Waitt, WSF Communications Staff